

New Urbanism in Practice

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In the past 10 years, New Urbanism (also known as traditional neighborhood development or neo-traditional planning) has emerged as an important philosophy of land use planning. Correspondingly, numerous articles in industry-specific publications such as *Planning*, *Urban Land*, and *Landscape Architecture* as well as mass audience publications like *Newsweek* and *Consumer Reports* have extolled the virtues and flaws of New Urbanism. This article assumes the reader understands the basic tenets of New Urbanism and has already formed an opinion on its effectiveness as a land planning model. Instead of introducing the concepts, this article focuses on putting the philosophy into practice through a review of a specific New Urban community currently under development from the perspective of a member of the development team. This review includes a description of the evolution of the project from the original idea conception, through the entitlement process, up to the building of the initial phases of the development. In the course of the review, the author identifies both positive and negative consequences resulting from the public and private interaction that is an important and unavoidable part of the development process.

Introduction

It would be difficult to imagine that anyone involved in the planning profession has not seen, read about, or discussed one of the “marquee” New Urban developments and their high profile designers. In fact, the two story walls of the sales office at Seaside (the most heralded New Urban project) are covered like wallpaper with articles about the community, photos of landmark buildings, and countless rendered plan views. Additionally, there are pictures of the husband and wife architecture/planning team, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, who have attained popular fame during the course of their relentless promotion of New Urbanism as a better way of planning. On the other side of the country, Peter Calthorpe has enjoyed great notoriety as a designer of numerous New Urban projects that include a focus on public transportation. The new Disney project, Celebration, has received intense scrutiny in its short life of construction. Because of the high profile nature of its developer, Celebration will likely dominate the coverage of New Urban development over the coming years—either to the benefit or the detriment of the philosophy.

There are many other New Urban communities across the country, however, that have not received the same national media coverage but are just as important as laboratories for the practice of the planning philosophy. Examples include projects such as Haile Plantation in Gainesville, Florida, where a vibrant town center is taking shape in the middle of a more conventional suburban development and Port Royal, South Carolina, which integrates affordable housing into the re-establishment of an urban center of a neglected town. Just down the road from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, another

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New Urban community, known as Southern Village, is under development. This project is far enough along that it is worthwhile to examine its progress while identifying both positive and negative impacts resulting from the public/private planning process.

Project Evolution

Small Area Plan

The early seeds of Southern Village were planted in the late 1980s when the Town of Chapel Hill undertook the creation of a Small Area Plan for the 2700 acre area within the extraterritorial planning jurisdiction immediately south of the existing town limits. The creation of this plan involved a committee consisting of members of the Town staff, public officials and local citizens. The plan evolved out of specific goals that the committee established for the area based on its existing form and expected growth patterns. By early 1992, the committee had created a plan which sought to protect the rural character of the area as well as prevent traffic congestion, but which also could accommodate the unavoidable growth expected over the coming years. These seemingly contradictory goals were met through a re-allocation of densities. Instead of zoning the area with uniform densities, the committee proposed a zoning scheme that concentrated development within a designated portion of the area through up-zoning and protected the rural character of the remaining acreage by down-zoning.

The Site

The site the committee designated for the concentrated development was selected primarily because of its prime location (near a major intersection and close to Chapel Hill), as well as the fact that it was one of the largest undeveloped tracts (about 300 acres) in the study area. The fact that the tract was for sale also contributed to its feasibility for development in the near future. The property, located along the existing southern boundary of the Town limits, is only slightly more than a mile away from the University of North Carolina hospital complex and just two miles away from the Town's central business district. The committee recognized that this proximity could allow for the efficient transmission of urban services like water and sewer as well as public transportation and also provided an opportunity for an eventual bike and pedestrian link

into Town as road improvements took place.

Project Goals

The Small Area Planning committee set limited goals for the area of concentrated development which they referred to as the "Southern Village." They hoped for a place that would be pedestrian and transit friendly, would provide ample open space and recreation space, and that might eventually have a commercial component that could serve the needs of the Village residents. In essence, the committee described a place that had many of the characteristics espoused by a growing number of planners who referred to this philosophy as New Urbanism.

The Private Sector Steps In

In June of 1992, the Chapel Hill Town Council adopted the Small Area Plan for the southern area. The general notion was that the actual implementation of the Plan would take place over an extended period of time. The development of the Southern Village, which was the cornerstone of the Plan, would occur when a private developer stepped forward who was willing to incorporate the key components of traditional neighborhood development. Probably to the surprise of local officials and citizens, not long after the adoption of the Small Area Plan, a developer stepped forward who was eager to put the ideas into practice.

This developer, D.R. Bryan, had originally read about neotraditional planning and its application by Duany and Plater-Zyberk at Seaside in an *Atlantic Monthly* article published in 1987. At the time, he was involved in residential development ranging from small infill projects to conventional suburban neighborhoods. Though he was intrigued with the ideas presented in the article, he was not sure of its acceptance by the market on a broad level, particularly in the suburban areas he was developing. He recognized, however, that there were aspects of the philosophy, such as interconnected street networks and continuous sidewalks, that made sense and could be incorporated into most plans.

In 1992, a land broker informed Bryan of a tract of land for sale in Chapel Hill that had been designated for development as a "village." Bryan was attracted to the prime location of the site though still skeptical of the universal appeal of neotraditional planning. Nonetheless, he studied the Small Area Plan and spoke with Town officials about their vision for the

Southern Village. He also researched other neotraditional developments that, unlike Seaside, were marketed as primary home communities. He visited two of these—Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and Harbortown in Memphis, Tennessee—and liked what he saw. More importantly, he recognized that the plans of these new communities did not represent a radical change in development patterns, but instead, simply emulated the land plans developed in the early twentieth century that now often represented the most desirable places to live in many cities. There were many local models of these older neighborhoods to pattern a new community after—places like Cameron Park in Raleigh, West End in Winston-Salem, and Dilworth in Charlotte. Each of these communities, which were the suburbs of their day, represented very strong markets for prospective buyers.

Bryan's marketing study for Southern Village consisted basically of a gut feel that if people were willing to pay top dollar to live in houses with substandard plumbing and electrical systems and out-dated floorplans, then there was a good chance homebuyers would be willing to consider new communities with homes built to meet modern demands but that have similar land patterns as these earlier neighborhoods—especially if the location was right. Though it would take awhile for a new community to establish the feel of an old neighborhood that only time and maturity can provide, he hoped that this gap could be bridged by the modern conveniences provided by new homes.

In the case of Southern Village, the location was right. As mentioned earlier, the Village site was virtually next door to the University and just down the road from probably the State's most vibrant downtown. The Town's permitting process presented a double-edged sword. Over the years, Chapel Hill had distinguished itself as one of the most difficult places to develop property on the East coast, much less North Carolina. This difficulty was evidenced by a lengthy, time- and money-consuming review process, in which approval was by no means

guaranteed. Additionally, the citizenry had a reputation of being generally opposed to growth and tended to elect officials having similar sentiments. The positive aspect of the difficult approval process was more strategic in nature—due to restricted competition (since most developers chose to avoid the entitlement risk), the local market was somewhat insulated from the swings of the business cycle that could have a major detrimental impact on a long term project. Bryan also wagered that Southern Village would have an easier route through the approval process since the idea was really the result of the Small Area Plan committee which consisted of many of the stakeholders who would review and judge the project.

Having gotten comfortable with the project, Bryan put the land under contract, and during the last half of 1992, he and his design team worked with the Town staff to create a masterplan for Southern

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Village. This planning stage included design charrettes in which many alternative plans were critiqued and adjusted. Upon agreement with the framework of the masterplan, Bryan's design team began to work through the details of the plan with the Town staff. Recognizing that many of the design components of the plan had not been employed locally for almost 50

years, Bryan hosted visits to new traditional neighborhoods under development, such as Kentlands, as well as older communities, such as West End, which had similar topographical conditions to the Southern Village site. Bryan hoped many potential points of conflict would be eliminated before going too far into the design process.

The Approval Process

The masterplan as well as a specific application for development of the first residential phase were presented to the various advisory boards and Town Council during the first half of 1993. During the course of these presentations, there was generally unanimous support of the plans. Because of the size of the project (at the time, the largest proposal

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considered in Chapel Hill), the Council reviewed the plans over a four month period, though there was virtually no public opposition during the hearings. The only speakers against the project were concerned about the amount of environmental disturbance necessary to build an urban village and the inclusion of office space in the commercial center (the Small Area Plan had envisioned only retail space). In the end, the project was approved unanimously by the Town Council.

The approval of the construction documents did not go as smoothly. Whereas in most municipalities, approval of such documents takes 30-60 days, it took about 9 months for Southern Village to gain the grading permits necessary to begin development. This delay was partially the result of not fully resolving the details of the plan during the initial review by the Town staff. During the construction approval process, it became apparent that some Town departments did not share the same enthusiasm about the project as other departments. These divergent views and resulting internal conflicts served to further complicate the review and timely approval of the plans.

Consequently, construction of the infrastructure finally began in the middle of 1994. Construction of the first homes started later that year, and in 1995, the first residents of the Village began moving in. As a demonstration of the direction of the new community, a corner store and cafe with offices on the second floor were constructed in the first residential phase. The first of 250 multi-family homes were started in 1995 and were ready for occupancy in 1996. A Park and Ride lot near the commercial area was opened in 1995. An existing daycare provider bought a parcel near the Park and Ride to build their new home and opened for business in 1996. The first of several office buildings was built in late 1996 at the entrance to the commercial area. To date, about 120 of the 200 planned homes for the first neighborhood have been completed. However, no specific plans for the retail component have been

established.

Given the long lead times created by the extended approval process in Chapel Hill, preparation of plans for the remaining acreage within the masterplan was started in early 1995. These plans, which included 4 more single family neighborhoods (including about 550 homesites), another multi-family project (with about 120 units), and a recreation complex, were first submitted to the Town in the first quarter of 1995. The staff review of these plans was complicated primarily by the design details of a state-mandated water quality facility instituted by a recently approved watershed protection ordinance. Another large project was also tracking through the Town review process concurrently and thereby made scheduling for Town Council meetings difficult. After several resubmittals (reflecting slight modifications), the applications were presented to the Council in May of 1996.

Unlike the first Public Hearings in 1993, this round of Hearings was contentious. Numerous citizens spoke against the project. Most of the opponents felt that the density was too high. Others argued that the site was not the best place for the Village because of its hilly terrain. A few opponents argued against proposed stub-outs that would connect the Village to other presently undeveloped tracts of land. Finally, other opponents were concerned about the project's traffic impact on outlying roads. It is worth noting that the density presented in the second round of hearings was actually lower than that originally approved in the masterplan process. Also, the same hilly terrain was illustrated in the initial public hearings and multiple stub-outs to outlying properties had always been shown on masterplan drawings. The concern about traffic impact was somewhat ironic since one of the central themes of the original plan was providing legitimate means of reducing auto trips by incorporating a park and ride lot into the design, as well as providing an eventual pedestrian and bike link into town and a commercial center that could allow residents to walk to shopping and work.

In analyzing the opposition, it became apparent that only a few individuals were driving the process, primarily because these individuals owned property that backed up to the planned future phases. Nonetheless, slight modifications were made to the plans. These changes dealt with proposed densities along the periphery of the site near existing neighborhoods. Specifically, townhomes that were originally scattered throughout the site (including the periphery) were confined to a more central area within

the Village allowing for a tapering of density along the edges of the site. The slightly modified plan was approved in November of 1996—about a year and a half after the original submittal for these phases. The Town staff is currently reviewing the construction drawings created for these plans. These final drawing approvals should be in place by mid-1997. Construction of the project is expected to continue through 2002.

Successes

Given that the planning aspect of Southern Village is largely completed, it is appropriate and constructive to assess both the positive and negative results of this planning process. Hopefully, the lessons learned can be applied to other new developments so that these projects can continue to improve the quality of the built environment.

Small Area Planning

A major success that laid the foundation for Southern Village was the creation of the Small Area Plan for the southern area of Chapel Hill. The Town should be commended for having the foresight to recognize the need for such a Plan. By focusing on a relatively small geographic area, the members of the committee were able to develop effective strategies to meet specific goals. Though the design of the Village was left somewhat open-ended, there was enough detail to establish a framework that could serve as a starting point. Furthermore, involving stakeholders in the decision-making process created a plan that had the general support of the neighboring community and allowed for a constructive initial round of public hearings.

School Siting

Another positive experience that utilized a cooperative effort on the part of the public and private sectors was the establishment of the future Southern Village Elementary. Early in the planning stages of the Village, the advantages of having an elementary school within walking distance were recognized. Such a situation would allow a child living in Southern Village to walk to school from kindergarten through eighth grade (an existing middle school is located on the northern border of the project). Unfortunately, at the time Southern Village was originally proposed,

the School Board was in the middle of constructing a new elementary school in another area and did not foresee the need for another elementary school in the near future. This assumption proved inaccurate a few years later when growth pressures pushed the brand new school to full capacity. As talk of the need for a new elementary school emerged, the Southern Village development approached the School authorities once more. Again, the prospects looked dim because the School Board had a state-imposed requirement that the site had to have at least 15 acres of land. Such a suburban configuration would not meet the needs of a compact, walkable community like Southern Village.

A couple of Town Council members refused to let the idea die. They saw an opportunity for the Town, the County (which funds construction of schools), the School Board, and the developer to work together to create a win-win situation for all the stakeholders. The Town already owned a 70-acre tract of land on the south boundary of Southern Village. This land had been purchased with the intention of building a community park with ballfields, tennis courts and other amenities. A plan had even been created but was discarded when it proved to be economically unjustifiable. The Council members suggested combining some of the land that was intended for a park with land within Southern Village so that the state requirements could be met. To make the proposition especially attractive to the School Board, the land would be donated from the Town and Southern Village. After working through the details of such a transaction, all the parties agreed to the proposal. In return for giving up about 9 acres, the Town will get a ballfield that can be shared with the school, as well as a shared parking lot. In return for its donation of 6 acres, Southern Village gained a school that is on schedule to open its doors by the 1999 school year—a major sales incentive for

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potential buyers.

Zoning

Yet another example of positive public/private interaction and problem solving concerned zoning. Many of the zoning regulations that have been written over the past 50 years actually forbid many of the land use patterns that are critical components of New Urbanism—including set-back requirements and restrictions on accessory dwellings and integrated mixtures of land uses. Because Chapel Hill already had a form of Planned Unit Development zoning in its development ordinance, many of the potential problems such as minimum lot size, building setbacks, and internal buffers, were easily overcome since the PUD zoning provided effective flexibility. The Town also has an “overlay” zoning which allows some conditional uses within standard zones. Such conditional uses include accessory dwellings, such as garage apartments that can be rented out or serve as “mother-in-law” apartments. The conditional uses also allow for small scale retail (like a corner store) and offices co-existing with surrounding residences.

A bigger problem that required more creativity involved zoning for the Village Core, which is proposed as the “downtown” of the Village with shops and offices as well as higher density housing. The Town had zoning in place that would fit the proposed type and scale of commercial and offices uses proposed for the Core. However, this zoning classification actually was set up to discourage residential uses. This situation was evidenced by a high requirement for open space and recreational improvements that would prohibit the establishment of a more urban setting in the Village Core. The Town recognized this disincentive and worked with the development team to craft a modified version of the zoning classification that used commercial land use intensities and applied those same ratios to residential uses. There is now an opportunity to build relatively dense

New Urbanism/Neotraditional Planning Web Sites

<http://citysearch11.com/E/V/RDUNC/1001/15/40>

Southern Village’s home page includes maps of the development, an overview of the development’s philosophy, and information about the houses and apartments.

<http://www.builderonline.com/builder/monthly/jul96/suburb.htm>

The July 1996 issue of Builder Online has an article describing traditional neighborhood development. The case studies accompanying the article include a case study of Southern Village and an interview with its developer.

<http://www.dpz-architects.com/>

The home page for the firm of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk includes an index of the firm’s projects; a brief description of towns with their projects, including Seaside, and directions to those towns; information on principles, techniques, and implementation of neotraditionalism; and information on ordering the Institute for Traffic Engineering’s guidelines, “Traffic Engineering for Neotraditional Neighborhood Design.”

<http://www.civano.com/>

The web site for Civano, a neotraditional development in Tucson, Arizona, includes a brief history of the project, an explanation of neotraditional concepts and principles, and maps and renderings of the project. The one drawback to the site is that the mottled background makes the text difficult to read.

<http://www.architecture.auckland.ac.nz/internal/FYI/articles/nurb.html>

The web site run by the University of Auckland School of Architecture Property and Planning has a database of articles related to architecture and planning, including this *New York Times* article from June 1996 providing an overview of the Congress for New Urbanism.

<http://www.art.bilkent.edu.tr/iaed/cb/Kaleli.html>

This site provides an overview of basic principles and criticisms of New Urbanism.

residential units within the Village Core (including dwellings above shops and offices) that will create a more urban-like vitality.

Disappointments

As is the case with many projects, there are some disappointments that go along with the successes. For Southern Village, most of the disappointments arose from struggles with the Town's Engineering Department and to a lesser degree, its Public Works Department. In other New Urban developments being built across the country, it is typically the same challenge in terms of dealing with local engineering and public works departments because many of the principle design components of New Urbanism do not fit the templates that have guided street design since World War II.

Street Widths

A continuing battle has been waged over street widths with the Town's Engineering Department. Typically, traffic engineers look at street systems as a series of collector streets and local streets designed to move cars as efficiently as possible. This philosophy often requires wide streets with broad turning radii. Conversely, New Urbanism design principles focus on making the pedestrian experience as positive as possible. One means of improving the pedestrian experience is to lay out and design streets in such a way that they slow cars down and thereby reduce potentially hazardous situations when cars and people inevitably interact. Such designs usually call for narrower streets with multiple, tight intersections.

Despite persistent attempts, the Town's Engineering Department would not fully adopt New Urbanist design principles on streets. Unfortunately, wider streets in the first phase of the development have promoted faster than desirable vehicular speeds. Residents have already begun to complain about this condition. Because of this, the development team is exploring several traffic calming techniques that might be implemented to restore the pedestrian as the primary focus of design.

Bicycle Path

Another discouraging outcome due to existing engineering standards was the design of the first phase of a paved bicycle and pedestrian path along a natural, greenway corridor that bisects the Village and will

eventually provide a link into Town. Because the greenway will be public, the Town required that the path meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards, creating initial design challenges due to difficult terrain conditions. To meet these standards, significant clearing and grading was required. Fortunately, a large portion of the path followed a sanitary sewer easement that also required clearing, thereby eliminating the need to clear two swaths through the natural area. Easing the slope of the path is definitely a benefit to those with handicaps, as well as other users such as parents pushing strollers and young children on bikes. This benefit outweighs the negative aspect of having to clear a larger area especially since re-planting will restore the natural feel of the area.

However, the enforcement of certain standards by the Town's engineering staff were not as understandable. Specifically, the Town required that the path have very long curves to allow for design speeds of up to 35 miles per hour along the steepest (5-8% slope) sections of the path. This requirement produces two negative consequences. First, the long, drawn out curves leave little flexibility in designing with the natural terrain and thereby necessitate more clearing and grading. Second, such geometry encourages and allows for faster speeds for users such as bicyclists and rollerbladers which, in turn, creates an unfriendly environment for walkers and other more passive users.

Alleys

Another point of conflict occurred with the Town's Public Works Department over the design and use of rear alleys, which are an important design feature of New Urban communities. Alleys can provide several benefits—the most obvious is moving automobile access to the rear of the garage instead of the front, thereby removing the visibility of unattractive garage doors from the streetscape and providing uninterrupted sidewalks for pedestrians. Another positive attribute of alleys is that they provide a corridor for utility lines (gas, electric, phone and cable) and thus remove unsightly above-ground devices from the streetscape. Finally, alleys provide an efficient means of providing services, such as mail delivery and trash/recycling collections. Southern Village enjoys all of these benefits except trash and recycling collection. The Town's Public Works Department will not allow their collection vehicles to travel on alleys unless they are constructed to Town

standards.

Building the alleys to Town standards would in effect require another street behind the houses. The Town's standards would require a paved area 33% wider than the existing alleys and in some areas, curbs and gutters. Experience has shown that wider travel lanes equate to faster vehicular speeds. For alleys to function properly as service lanes and not thoroughfares, design speeds must be kept to a minimum. By constructing alleys to public standards, it would create an unappealing situation in which residences are in effect sandwiched between two streets. In response to this potential situation, the development team opted to use private alleys that are narrower than Town standards and thereby sacrifice the seemingly logical collection of refuse along the alleys. After annexation by the Town (expected in 2-4 years), residents will be required to push roll-cart containers to the street in front of their home on specified days. Currently, a private contractor is collecting trash from the rear alleys; no problems have been reported to date.

Conclusion

Planning jurisdictions wishing to put the philosophy of New Urbanism into practice can take away several important lessons from the experiences of Southern Village. First, it is critical to involve all stakeholders in establishing the foundations of New Urban communities by setting realistic goals and even identifying the most suitable sites—as was the case with Chapel Hill's Small Area Planning process. Second, it is very important that all Town departments “buy into” the idea and adopt design criteria that enhance the plan. Such commitment may help to prevent a situation where design requirements like wide streets conflict with one of the most important principles of New Urbanism—pedestrian friendliness. Finally, the spirit of public and private partnership should be promoted to the fullest extent possible. It must be remembered that development is an interactive process, and in order to make great places, it is critical to maximize the resources and abilities of all the stakeholders involved. 